



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## A NEGRO SENATOR

Incredible as it may sound to the twentieth century reader, the Commonwealth of Mississippi was for six years ably represented in the United States Senate by a distinguished Negro Senator, the Honorable B. K. Bruce. So inspiring is the story of Senator Bruce's efforts in the defense of humanity that it ought not to be permitted to lie in obscurity for want of a sympathetic pen. The present venture, therefore, is an attempt, though belated, to recount some of the achievements of this statesman whose public career looms up as a monument to the American Negro's self-confidence, resolution, and persistency.

Senator Bruce's career in the upper chamber of Congress began on March 5, 1875, at the special session of the Forty-fourth Congress, called by President Grant. His name appears in the *Congressional Record* of that session as "Branch" K. Bruce, Floreyville, Mississippi. He was assigned to the *Committee on Manufactures* and to the *Committee on Education and Labor* and later to the *Committee on Pensions* and the *Committee on the Improvement of the Mississippi River and its Tributaries*.<sup>1</sup>

Antedating his election to the United States Senate, Senator Bruce had held positions of trust and honor in the State of Mississippi. He had been Sheriff, Tax-Collector, Commissioner of the Levees Board, and County Superintendent of Education. Moreover, he had served as Sergeant-at-Arms of the first State Senate after the Reconstruction Period, and Commissioner of Elections in a county that was reputed as being the most lawless in the State. In all these positions, Senator Bruce had displayed such integrity of purpose, sagacious statesmanship, and tireless industry that his election to the United States Senate followed as a logical and merited promotion.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Congressional Record*, 44th Congress, First Session.

<sup>2</sup> Simmons, *Men of Mark*, 699-703.

Senator Bruce's "maiden speech" in the Senate was delivered shortly after he took his seat during the special session. The speech was a vigorous protest against the proposed removal of the troops from the South, Mississippi in particular, where the military authorities were still in control. The speech made a profound impression on the Senate and clearly indicated the manly stand which Senator Bruce was preparing to take against the injustices practised against Negro citizens both North and South.<sup>3</sup>

The regular session of the Forty-fourth Congress, which convened on Monday, December 6, 1875, gave Senator Bruce numerous opportunities for energetic efforts. Early in the session, he presented a petition of the Sons of Temperance of the District of Columbia, praying for legislation for the District of Columbia and the Territories; for the prohibition of the importation of alcoholic liquors from abroad and that total abstinence be made a condition of the civil, military, and naval service. Later he introduced a Bill "to provide for the payment of bounties, etc., to colored soldiers and sailors and their heirs."<sup>4</sup> His first important opportunity for valuable service came during the discussion of the resolution to admit former Governor Pinchback as a Senator from Louisiana. The resolution had been presented on March 5, 1875, at the special session of the Senate—"That P. B. S. Pinchback be admitted as a Senator from the State of Louisiana for the term of six years, beginning with the fourth of March 1873." Senator Bruce delivered the following address:

When I entered upon my duties here as Senator from Mississippi, the question ceased to be novel, and had already been elaborately and exhaustively discussed. So far as opportunity has permitted me to do so, I have dispassionately examined the question in the light of the discussion, and I venture my views now with the diffidence inspired by my limited experience in the consideration of such questions and by a just appreciation of the learning and

<sup>3</sup> *Congressional Record*, 44th Congress, 1st Session, pp. 2100-2105.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 736, 1547, 5138.

ability of the gentlemen who have already attempted to elucidate and determine this case.

I believe, Mr. President, whatever seeming informalities may attach to the manner in which the will of the people was ascertained, Mr. Pinchback is the representative of a majority of the legal voters of Louisiana, and is entitled to a seat in the Senate. In the election of 1872, the white population of the State exceeded, by the census of 1872, the colored population by about two thousand, including in the white estimate 6,300 foreigners, only half of whom were naturalized. This estimate, at the same ratio in each race, would give a large majority of colored voters. The census and registration up to 1872 substantially agree, and both sustain this conclusion. The census of 1875, taken in pursuance of an article of the State constitution, gives, after including the foreign population (naturalized and unnaturalized) in the white aggregate, a majority of 45,695 colored population.

This view of the question is submitted not as determining the contest, but as an offset to the allegation that Mr. Pinchback does not fairly represent the popular will of the State, and as a presumption in favor of the legal title of the assembly that elected him.

The State government elected in 1872, and permanently inaugurated in January 1873, in the face of contest and opposition, obtained for its authority the recognition of the inferior and supreme courts of the State. When organized violence threatened its existence and the United States Government was appealed to for troops to sustain it, the national Executive, in pursuance of his constitutional authority and duty, responded to the demand made for help, prefacing said action by an authoritative declaration, made through the Attorney General, addressed to Lieutenant-Governor Pinchback, then Acting Governor, of date of December 12, 1872, that said Pinchback was "recognized as the lawful executive of Louisiana, and the body assembled at Mechanics' Institute as the lawful Legislature of the State"; and similar recognition of his successor was subsequently given. When in September 1874, an attempt was made to overthrow the government, the President again interposed with the Army and Navy for its protection and the maintenance of its authority.

This government has proceeded to enact and enforce laws for three years, which not only affect life, liberty, and property, but which have received the general obedience of the citizens of the

State. The present government also has frequently been brought in official contact with the United States Congress—through its legislatures of 1873 and 1875, by memorials and joint resolutions addressed to the respective Houses; and through its executive, by credentials, borne by Congressmen and by Senators—and in no case has the legitimate authority of the Legislature been excepted to save in the action of electing a United States Senator; and in no instance has the sufficiency of the executive's credentials been questioned, in either House, except in the matter of the senatorial claimant.

Now, sir, shall we admit by our action on this case that for three years the State of Louisiana has not had a lawful Legislature; that its laws have been made by an unauthorized mob; that the President of the United States actively, and Congress, by non-action at least, have sustained and perpetuated this abnormal, illegal, wrongful condition of things, thereby justifying and provoking the indignant and violent protests of one portion of the people of that State, and inviting them to renewed and continued agitation and violence? Such action by us would be unjust to the claimant, a great wrong to the people who sent him here, and cruel even to that class who have awaited an opportunity to bring to their support the overwhelming moral power of the nation in the pursuit of their illusion—which has so nearly ruined the future of that fair State—a government based upon the prejudices of caste.

I respectfully ask attention of Senators to another view of this subject, which is not without weight in determining the obligations of this body to the State of Louisiana and in ascertaining the title of the claimant. If the assumption that the present government inaugurated in 1873 is without legal authority and usurpation is true, the remedy for the state of things was to be found in the exercise of Congress through the joint action of the two Houses of the powers conferred under the guaranteeing clause of the Constitution relative to republican forms of government in the several States.

Failing to exercise her power and perform her duty in this direction, and thus practically perpetuating the present government, I submit that, in my judgment, we cannot now ignore our obligation to give the State her full representation on the score of the alleged irregularity of the government through which she has expressed her will; and there does seem to me, in this connection, something in-

congruous in the proposition that we may impose upon the people a government without legal sanction and demand their obedience to and support thereof, said government meanwhile determining the character of its successors and thus perpetuating its talent, and yet are powerless to admit a Senator elected thereby.

In my judgment, this question shall at this juncture be considered and decided not on abstract but practical grounds. Whatever wrongs have been done and mistakes made in Louisiana by either party, the present order of things is accepted by the people of the State and by the nation, and will be maintained as a final settlement of the political issues that have divided the people there; and no changes in the administration of public affairs can or will be made except by the people, through the ballot, under the existing government and laws of the Commonwealth.

Under these circumstances, holding the question in abeyance is, in my judgment, an unconstitutional deprivation of the right of a State, and a provocation to popular disquietude; and in the interest of good-will and good government, the most judicious and consistent course is to admit the claimant to his seat.

I desire, Mr. President, to make a personal reference to the claimant. I would not attempt one or deem one proper were it not that his personal character has been assailed.

As a father, I know him to be affectionate; as a husband, the idol of a pleasant home and cheerful fireside; as a citizen, loyal, brave, and true. And in his character and success we behold an admirable illustration of the excellence of our republican institutions.<sup>5</sup>

This speech, printed in its entirety, is an honest, frank, and convincing enunciation of republican truths. It is an unselfish and sober appeal for justice to another member of the Negro race. Bereft of all rhetorical embellishments, as the speech is, it may well pass for a masterpiece of logical thought and dynamic expression. It is the forerunner of even mightier utterances.

Long before Senator Bruce donned his senatorial toga, rioting in Mississippi had become prevalent. In fact, his own county, Bolivar, was perhaps the only one in the State which had not furnished a stage for bitter race feuds; and

<sup>5</sup> *Congressional Record*, 1st Session, pp. 1444, 1445.

even this county narrowly averted a calamity. Back in the early seventies, a report gained currency that in a few days there was to be a "shooting up" in Bolivar. Guns and ammunition were being stored, and the outlook became menacing. The riot, however, was averted because Senator Bruce went personally to the controlling citizens and succeeded in arousing a strong sentiment against the threatening disorder. Bolivar County was thus enabled to boast that it had never been stained with bloodshed, and even today the memory of Senator Bruce is held in highest respect in Bolivar County.

In other sections of the State, rioting became so prevalent, especially on election days, that the returns of the elections were open to serious doubt. The United States Senate was forced to take cognizance of this condition. On Friday, March 31, 1876, a Resolution was introduced appointing a Committee "to investigate the late election in Mississippi." Senator Bruce embraced this opportunity to give a clear exposition of the condition of affairs in his State. His speech on this occasion reveals him as a broad-minded and courageous statesman free from the curse of narrow dogma and paltry aim. He began by announcing the basic principles of a democracy that will survive:

The conduct of the late election in Mississippi affected not merely the fortunes of the partisans—as the same were necessarily involved in the defeat or success of the respective parties to the contest—but put in question and jeopardy the sacred rights of the citizens; and the investigation contemplated in the pending resolution has for its object not the determination of the question whether the offices shall be held and the public affairs of the State be administered by Democrats or Republicans, but the higher and more important end, the protection in all their purity and significance of the political rights of the people and the free institutions of the country.<sup>6</sup>

He continued by referring to the evidence which proved that the voters of Mississippi in the "late election" had not had an actual opportunity to cast their votes:

<sup>6</sup> *Congressional Record*, 44th Congress, 1st Session, pp. 2100-2105.

The evidence in hand and accessible will show beyond peradventure that in many parts of the State corrupt and violent influences were brought to bear upon the registrars of voters, thus materially affecting the character of the voting or poll lists; upon the inspectors of election, prejudicially and unfairly, thereby changing the number of votes cast; and finally threats and violence were practiced directly upon the masses of voters in such measure and strength as to produce grave apprehensions for personal safety and as to deter them from the exercise of their political franchises.

It was in this speech that Senator Bruce replied to the erstwhile criticism that the Negro was a coward because he endured every kind of indignity without retaliating. Taking the prevalent view of progressive thought of the nineteenth century, he spoke as follows:

It will not accord with the laws of nature or history to brand colored people a race of cowards. On more than one historic field, beginning in 1776 and coming down to the centennial year of the Republic, they have attested in blood their courage as well as a love of liberty. I ask Senators to believe that no consideration of fear or personal danger has kept us quiet and forbearing under the provocations and wrongs that have so sorely tried our souls. But feeling kindly towards our white fellow-citizens, appreciating the good purposes and offices of the better classes, and, above all, abhorring war of races, we determined to wait until such time as an appeal to the good sense and justice of the American people could be made.<sup>7</sup>

This pronouncement of Senator Bruce exalting the manly virtue of patience, even in the face of grave injustices, was preeminently representative of the most highly educated Negro thought of the century in which Senator Bruce lived, and must be interpreted in terms of the philosophy of his day. If it should be objected to by some of the most highly developed Negro thought of the present day, the increasing tendency towards retaliation should be attributed partly to the American Negro's metamorphosis since the colossal struggle for that Utopian dream—a World's Democracy.

<sup>7</sup> *Congressional Record*, 44th Congress, 1st Session, p. 2104.



Perhaps the part of Senator Bruce's speech which has given most impetus to similar modern expression is contained in the following excerpt:

The sober American judgment must obtain in the South as elsewhere in the Republic, that the only distinctions upon which parties can be safely organized and in harmony with our institutions are differences of opinion relative to principles and policies of government, and that differences of religion, nationality, or race can neither with safety nor propriety be permitted for a moment to enter into the party contests of the day. The unanimity with which the colored voters act with a party is not referable to any race prejudice on their part. On the contrary, they invite the political cooperation of their white brethren, and vote as a unit because proscribed as such. They deprecate the establishment of the color line by the opposition, not only because the act is unwise, but because it isolates them from the white men of the South and forces them, in sheer self-protection, and against their inclination, to act seemingly upon the basis of a race prejudice that they neither respect nor entertain. They not only recognize the equality of citizenship and the right of every man to hold without proscription any position of honor and trust to which the confidence of the people may elevate him; but owing nothing to race, birth, or surroundings, they above all other classes, in the community, are interested to see prejudices drop out of both politics and the business of the country, and success in life proceed upon the integrity and merit of the man who seeks it. . . . But withal, as they progress in intelligence and appreciation of the dignity of their prerogatives as citizens, they as an evidence of growth begin to realize the significance of the proverb, "When thou doest well for thyself, men shall praise thee"; and are disposed to exact the same protection and concession of rights that are conferred upon other citizens by the Constitution, and that too without humiliation involved in the enforced abandonment of their political convictions.

The speech closes with an enthusiastic expression of confidence in American institutions and in the American Negro:

I have confidence, not only in my country and her institutions, but in the endurance, capacity and destiny of my people. We will,

as opportunity offers and ability serves, seek our places, sometimes in the field of letters, arts, science and the professions. More frequently mechanical pursuits will attract and elicit our efforts; more still of my people will find employment and livelihood as the cultivators of the soil. The bulk of this people—by surroundings, habits, adaptation, and choice will continue to find their homes in the South and constitute the masses of its yeomanry. We will there, probably of our own volition and more abundantly than in the past, produce the great staples that will contribute to the basis of foreign exchange, aid in giving the nation a balance of trade, and minister to the wants and comforts and build up the prosperity of the whole land. Whatever our ultimate position in the composite civilization of the republic and whatever varying fortunes attend our career, we will not forget our instincts for freedom nor our love for country.<sup>8</sup>

A careful study of the speech shows what a model it has been for speakers and writers of a much later period. It deals openly and frankly with the Southern question, and is prophetic of President Harding's recent utterances on the Negro's political status in the South.

During the second session of the Forty-fourth Congress, Mr. Bruce confined his efforts largely to the relief of the legal heirs of Negro soldiers who had fought to preserve the Union. Consequently, he introduced a number of bills praying that arrears of pensions be granted. In this way, he became the benefactor of many persons who otherwise might never have received their pensions. In addition to such relief legislation, he presented for the second time a petition praying for a general law prohibiting liquor traffic, and introduced a bill for certain improvements in the Mississippi River.<sup>9</sup>

The Forty-fifth Congress was not especially eventful. Senator Bruce, however, continued to introduce bills for the relief of legal heirs of soldiers. During the second session of this Congress, he took an active interest in the

<sup>8</sup> *Congressional Record*, Forty-sixth Congress, 1st Session, p. 2104.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2105.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2105.

Chinese Exclusion Bill, registering his vote against the measure which seemed to him to be contrary to American principles. His denunciation of the selfish policy of the United States toward the Indian was more pronounced than that of his dissatisfaction with the restriction of the immigration of the Chinese. He believed that the attitude of the Americans toward the Indian bred hatred and discontent and made the Indian a fugitive and a vagabond. He believed that the United States Government should do something to civilize the Indian rather than to restrict him. The Indian could be made a desirable citizen if the best elements of his nature were developed to enable him to exercise the functions of citizenship. He early advocated, therefore, that the Indians should cease to be dealt with as tribes and should receive consideration as individuals, "subject to American law and beneficiaries of American institutions." The Indian then, when no longer branded as an outlaw, would in the very near future advance to the position when the cooperation and the protection of the white man would be welcomed as that of friends.<sup>11</sup>

It was during the Forty-sixth Congress that Senator Bruce was most active. Senator Bruce did most constructive work in advocating the improvement of the navigation of the Mississippi river. The importance of this question today is not so striking as it was at that time for the reason that little had been done to protect life and property from the inundations of that stream. Senator Bruce kept this important problem before Congress urging not only that the interest of the people in the valley itself be taken care of, but that this river should by adequate facilities be made the highway of interstate and foreign commerce. Toward this end Senator Bruce offered several bills meeting the exigencies of the time and providing for future needs. As the foresight of a majority of the members of Congress at that time was not sufficient to appreciate this statesmanlike effort of Senator Bruce, his program for

<sup>11</sup> *Congressional Record*, Forty-sixth Congress, 2d Session, pp. 2195-2196.

this important internal improvement was not carried out, although some important efforts since then to supply this need in our economic development must be considered as due in some measure to the persistence and the courage of Senator Bruce in keeping this question before Congress.<sup>12</sup>

Senator Bruce, moreover, had been watching, with increasing misgivings, the affairs of that notorious banking bubble, more pretentiously known as the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company. To protect the rights of the depositors of the defunct institution, he offered the following resolution, on April 7, 1879:

That the President of the Senate appoint a committee of five on the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company to take into consideration all matters relating to said institution, and that said committee be authorized to employ a clerk, and that the necessary expenses be paid out of the "miscellaneous items" of the contingent fund of the Senate.<sup>13</sup>

The resolution was considered by unanimous consent and agreed to. The Vice President, the Honorable William A. Wheeler, subsequently appointed Senator Bruce as Chairman of this committee. The other members were Senators Cameron of Wisconsin, Gordon, Withers, and Garland. To head such a committee was, indeed, an enviable privilege, but the real opportunity lay in the kind of service which the entangled affairs of the bank made possible. At this time, the affairs of the bank were in the hands of three commissioners, each receiving \$3000 a year, and no promise of winding up the business of the bank was foreshadowed. Thus the available assets were reduced annually by the total amount of these salaries. The assets, of course, were to be paid *pro rata* to the depositors.

In order that his committee might have more power to go into the management of the bank, Senator Bruce offered the following resolution on May 16, 1879:

<sup>12</sup> *Congressional Record*, Forty-fifth Congress, 1st Session, pp. 201, 245; 3d Session, pp. 1314, 1316, 2309.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, Forty-sixth Congress, 1st Session, pp. 45, 71, 435, 1679, 2415; 3d Session, pp. 632, 668.

That the Select Committee on the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company appointed by resolution of the Senate of April 7, 1879, is authorized and directed to investigate the affairs of said savings and trust company and its several branches, to ascertain and report to the Senate all matters relating to the management of the same and the cause or causes of failure, with such other facts relating thereto as may be important to a full understanding of the management and present condition of the institution and to a more economical administration and speedy adjustment of its affairs.

Following this resolution, Senator Bruce presented a petition of R. M. Hall, M.D., and others, citizens of Baltimore, Maryland, praying the passage of an act requiring the commissioners of the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company to close up the affairs of the institution and distribute the assets among the creditors thereof. This petition was presented on May 27, 1879.

The resolution and the petition had their desired effect. The services of the commissioners were dispensed with, thus saving \$9000 a year for the depositors; and the final settlement of the claims was turned over to the Controller of the Treasury. To Senator Bruce's Committee, therefore, goes the credit of bringing a speedy close to the affairs of the defunct Freedman's Savings and Trust Company, with the minimum of further loss to the depositors. Later, Senator Bruce made a strong, but vain, appeal to reimburse the colored depositors of the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company for losses incurred by the failure of the bank.

His final dealings with the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company came in the third session of the Forty-sixth Congress, when he introduced the following bill:

That the Senate authorize and direct the purchase by the Secretary of the Treasury, for public use, the property known as the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company, and the real estate and parcels of ground adjacent thereto, belonging to the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company, and located on Pennsylvania Avenue

between Fifteenth and Fifteenth-and-a-half Streets, Washington, District of Columbia.

The bill was considered, amended, and passed.<sup>14</sup>

Ever alert to the educational needs of the colored youth, Senator Bruce introduced, among many other bills, during the second session of the Forty-sixth Congress, a bill:

To provide for the investment of certain unclaimed pay and bounty moneys now in the Treasury of the United States and to facilitate and encourage the education of the colored race in the several States and Territories.

The bill was referred to the *Committee on Education and Labor*, amended by Mr. Pendleton of Ohio, and reported back adversely and postponed indefinitely.<sup>15</sup>

Senator Bruce was not returned to the Forty-seventh Congress. The record, however, which he made in the Forty-fourth, Forty-fifth, and Forty-sixth Congresses will ever maintain for him a prominent place among the progressive and constructive statesmen of this country. And here our account should end if it were not for the fact that some of our readers will want a glimpse of some of the significant events in Senator Bruce's life, exclusive of his career in the Senate. A condensed account of such facts will suffice.

Senator Bruce was not a native Mississippian. He was born in the little town of Farmville, Virginia. At an early age, he made his way to Missouri, thence to Mississippi where he arrived in 1868. In 1878, he married Miss Josephine B. Wilson, of Cleveland, Ohio, a lady of most excellent parts and refined culture. A son, Roscoe Conklin, was born in 1879—a polished gentleman by birth, an educator by training, an orator and debater by choice, and a scholar by nature. Both wife and son survive the late Senator.<sup>16</sup>

Senator Bruce belonged to that rugged, self-made type of manhood that did right to prosper in this world and

<sup>14</sup> *Congressional Record*, Forty-sixth Congress, 2d Session, pp. 45, 273, 538.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1619, 1953, 2053, 2384, 4563.

<sup>16</sup> See Simmons, *Men of Mark*, pp. 699-703.

hope for felicity in the next. He studied under private tutors and spent two years at Oberlin College. Like many successful statesmen, he served his time in the classroom as a teacher. It was during his teaching career that he was persuaded by Henry Ward Beecher to enter the Christian ministry, but the inward voice did not respond to the ministerial call.

Though his tenure of office as United States Senator lasted but one full term of six years, he was given further opportunities for public service. From 1881 to 1885, he served as Register of the Treasury, having been appointed to this office by President Garfield. In 1889, during the administration of President Benjamin Harrison, he was appointed Recorder of Deeds when the office was operated under a system of fees which netted from twelve to fifteen thousand dollars a year. President McKinley called him a second time to the office of Register of the Treasury, in which position he remained until his death in 1898.

G. DAVID HOUSTON